

Revitalizing Oregon's existing buildings through adaptive reuse

Oregon Building Codes Division (BCD) is providing this backgrounder to share regulatory information and describe technical services for the support of adaptive reuse of existing buildings across the state.

Adaptive reuse

Adaptive reuse, the sustainable practice of repurposing existing buildings, is occurring in communities across Oregon. Rather than demolishing and rebuilding, adaptive reuse extends the life of existing structures, often transforming underutilized or vacant, non-residential buildings (e.g., retail, office, hotel) into vibrant housing or mixed use developments. This approach not only supports urban regeneration but also contributes to strengthened communities, particularly as Oregon explores building more multifamily housing projects across the state to meet housing demand and provide more affordable options to all Oregonians.

BCD provides flexible tools within the state building code to facilitate safe and efficient conversions through policy guidance, technical support, and collaboration with local jurisdictions. BCD is committed to enabling adaptive reuse projects that enhance livability, preserve community character, and expand Oregon's housing supply.

Increasing housing through adaptive reuse of existing buildings

BCD's statutory authority, as well as established customer service programs, are in alignment with the implementation of adaptive reuse projects that support statewide housing goals.

Key milestones include:

- May 2022: BCD issued an initial *Adaptive Reuse of Existing Buildings Memorandum* outlining tools in the building code that support adaptive reuse.
- July 2024: In addition to existing roles and responsibilities of the BCD Structural Program, the Housing and Building Safety (HABS) section was formed. HABS is part of the joint office between the Department of Land Conservation and Development (DLCD) and BCD called the Housing Accountability and Production Office (HAPO), which was created by Senate Bill 1537 (2024). HAPO became operational on July 1, 2025, with a primary focus of supporting increased housing development, the Governor's housing production initiatives, and to assist in the removal of related development process barriers.
- December 2024: A BCD report was submitted to the Legislature that recognized building reuse, including reuse of an existing building's primary structural frame and exterior wall envelope, as a code-supported strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase housing production.
- October 2025: With the adoption of the 2025 OSSC, BCD reaffirmed flexible code compliance and application options for the adaptive reuse of existing buildings.
- November 2025: HAPO kicked off the Local Residential Development Process Improvement Study, which is one part of the HAPO directed analysis of state and local programs, policies, and process that impact housing development required by Senate Bill 1537 (2024). The study focuses on local government processes that impact housing development, with a particular emphasis on land use, public works, local infrastructure, and construction permitting.

Regulatory provisions and options for the reuse of existing buildings

Statewide building code provisions include flexibility in regulating adaptive reuse. Moreover, BCD provides adaptive reuse support services that maintain robust safety standards while prioritizing plan reviews and permitting, especially in rural and underserved communities. For existing buildings, the Oregon Structural Specialty Code (OSSC) recognizes the International Existing Building Code (IEBC), and facilitates greater compliance, increased safety, and reasonable safeguards while encouraging adaptive reuse. Existing building projects can be complicated and most often require the expertise of a registered design professional familiar with existing building code provisions. While building officials' roles do not include providing any type of design advice or pre-project development summaries listing all existing nonconforming elements of a given existing building slated for adaptive reuse, the building officials across our state, including those at the division, are great sources of general project facilitation and should be contacted early on in the existing building project process.

Regulatory applicability: Projects involving the reuse of existing buildings are governed by Chapter 34 of the OSSC, which is a modified version of the IEBC. Existing building regulatory provisions are applicable to alteration, addition, and potential changes of use, character, or occupancy for all building types.

Chapter 34 of the OSSC: The Oregon-integrated IEBC noted above outlines three compliance methods in Sections 3403.1.3.1, 3403.1.3.2, and 3403.1.3.3 for customers to consider; prescriptive, work area, and performance.

- The Prescriptive Compliance Method follows a more traditional code application hierarchy; consistent with historic compliance paths of Chapter 34 from earlier International Building Code iterations as well as the Uniform Building Code.
- The Work Area Compliance Method outlines varied levels of work scope based on the type of work proposed and the actual area of the existing building being impacted. This method focuses on compliance tiers proportionate to the designated levels of work and provides for more flexible design options, particularly where only a portion of the building is undergoing alterations or changes of use or occupancy.
- The Performance Compliance Method comprises elements from historic rehabilitation codes including the Uniform Code for Building Conservation. It uses a numerical scoring system and evaluation of existing building elements to determine necessary compliance. This method is popular for existing buildings constructed prior to Oregon's first statewide building code in 1974.

Changes to existing Risk Category: Regardless of the compliance method selected, any proposed increase to the existing Risk Category of the building may trigger additional seismic loading compliance considerations for a project.

A common misunderstanding of existing building regulation is regarding mandatory "seismic upgrades" for every change of use or adaptive reuse project. There are no such requirements under application of the state building code that automatically apply simply due to a building being existing. Local municipalities also have exclusive statutory authority to develop local seismic rehabilitation plans and programs entirely outside administration and enforcement of the state building code.

Under application of OSSC Chapter 34, demonstration of an existing building's ability to meet modern seismic design requirements is only relevant where a newly proposed use and occupancy of the existing building increases the assumed level of inherent risk to the occupants (i.e. increase in Risk Category such as changing a standard office building into a theater; transforming a commercial retail space into a school; and changing from a storage or utility occupancy to a residential or office space).

Major structural alterations also require structural design compliance as specified by OSSC Chapter 34. In these cases, current code requirements apply to all impacted areas of the existing building, as well as to the new work. Seismic design requirements and associated loading from current code are necessary performance considerations for these types of planned structural modifications and alterations.

Existing building accessible design: Conversions into covered multifamily dwellings.

OSSC Chapter 34 includes provisions in Section 3403 that apply to all three compliance methods. This includes accessibility compliance for all existing buildings in Section 3403.6. These requirements must be considered regardless of the compliance method selected for a given project.

There is common misapplication of accessibility compliance for projects where existing buildings or portions thereof are being converted to multifamily use. The accessible unit compliance paths of Chapter 34 align with the federal Fair Housing Act (FHA) and include the concept of “first occupancy.”

The FHA, and state building code, intentionally only apply accessible unit design requirements to covered multifamily dwellings currently built for “first occupancy,” meaning newly constructed. Conversions of any existing building, or portion thereof, into multifamily dwellings do not require any type of mandated accessible unit design compliance. “First occupancy” is defined as “a building that has never before been used for any purpose.”

Customers may always elect to voluntarily exceed minimum code requirements, and provide accessible unit design where an existing building is being converted to multifamily use. Any common use spaces or amenities and all areas of public accommodation (e.g. a leasing office) still require appropriate levels of accessible design compliance, dependent on the overall scope of work.

Existing building regulatory provisions and options for energy efficiency

Regulatory applicability: For adaptive reuse of existing building projects, the energy code requirements are in the Oregon Energy Efficiency Specialty Code (OEESC) as well as the OSSC. They both have general applications.

Additions, alterations, renovations, or repairs shall conform to energy provisions in the building codes. Unaltered areas of existing buildings may remain as-is. Maintenance of existing energy-related systems to return them to working order shall not be considered an alteration.

The OEESC, which is based on ASHRAE 90.1, has provisions that apply to new energy-related installations and alterations. The applicable sections include:

ASHRAE 90.1, Section 4.2.1.3. Alterations of existing building assemblies, systems, and equipment shall comply with the provisions of Section 4.2.2 through 4.2.5 and one of the following options:

- a. Section 5, “Building Envelope”; Section 6, “Heating, Ventilating, and Air Conditioning”; Section 7, “Service Water Heating”; Section 8, “Power”; Section 9, “Lighting”; Section 10, “Other Equipment” and Section 11, “Additional Efficiency Requirements,” or*
- b. Section 12, “Energy Cost Budget Method,” or*
- c. Normative Appendix G, “Performance Rating Method”*

The OSSC has provisions that apply to new energy-related installations and alterations. The applicable sections include:

- OSSC Section 3409.7.1. Level 3 alterations to existing buildings or structures are permitted without requiring the entire building or structure to comply with the energy requirements of the energy code.
- OSSC Section 3403.2. Mechanical and electrical code compliance is addressed as additional codes in the reuse existing buildings.

Substantial alterations, defined as “where a major renovation of part or all of an existing building includes major replacement of at least two major building systems”, expand the energy code compliance scope beyond general application. The following sections are applicable to substantial alteration projects involving the reuse of existing buildings:

- All new lighting and all new HVAC systems shall comply with ASHRAE 90.1, Section 11.1.4.1.
- The total number of energy credits required for the project is determined in ASHRAE 11.5.1, part c. Projects that are not initial build-out construction shall achieve 50% of the total of credits required in Table 11.5.1-1 for the building use type in the substantial alteration portion of the building.

BCD technical services for adaptive reuse of existing buildings and related projects

BCD is available to address questions and provide informal interpretations to support local municipalities relative to the applicability of the building codes for adaptive reuse of existing buildings. Project teams are encouraged to consult with BCD staff for assistance with:

- On-site walkthroughs and consultations where appropriate
- Site-specific code solutions and related pathways
- Guidance on reasonable safeguards for site-specific challenges
- Consultations on optional compliance pathways
- Damage repair allowances without triggering unrelated upgrades
- Ensuring alterations do not reduce existing levels of code compliance
- Coordination with local building officials and local fire service representatives

Questions?

Visit the division website to [contact a building code specialist](#).